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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: VISITING CHALDEAN ARCHBISHOP OF TEHRAN ON
SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN IRAN, IRAQ

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Visiting Chaldean Archbishop of Tehran Ramzi Garmou (protect) offered impressions of the difficult situation of Christians in Iran and Iraq during a meeting with poloff January 14. (Note: Garmou had contacted poloff to seek Embassy assistance in applying for a NIV to attend the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington in early February; his visa was issued January 18. He is an Iraqi passport holder, born in Zakho, Iraq, and has served as Archbishop in the Roman Catholic (Chaldean) Archdiocese of Tehran since 1999. End note.) Garmou described the situation of Christians in Iran as difficult, with the Iranian government allowing Christians to practice their religion behind closed doors only. Garmou noted that while the Iranian government, unlike Saudi Arabia, allowed churches to operate, local church activities were heavily monitored and infiltrated by the security services. He added that he had to seek government permission and interviews with security service officials each time he sought to travel overseas. During one trip to Europe, he noted, he received a surprise call from the local Iranian ambassador there, as if to let him know that his movements were being watched.

2. (C) Garmou described the number of Chaldean Christians in Iran as ranging from 10,000 to 12,000, with emigration taking a heavy toll on Iran's Christian population since 1979. He described the Chaldean population in Iran as somewhat dispersed, with concentrations in Tehran and western Iran; the socio-economic level of Chaldeans was generally modest, with many involved in agriculture or other non-professional occupations due to barriers to social advancement and government jobs for Christians. He observed that Iran's largest Christian population remained Armenian Orthodox Christians, whom he estimated to number about 65,000.

3. (C) Garmou was downbeat on the current situation of Christians in Iraq, and continually referred to Operation Iraqi Freedom as the U.S. "invasion" of Iraq. He described widespread emigration of Christians from Iraq due to security threats, and estimated that some 400,000 Iraqi Christians had fled northern Iraq for Syria. Garmou and his colleague, a Paris-based Iraqi Chaldean Christian businessman named Elish Zako, blamed "Saudi Wahhabists" for fomenting anti-Christian sentiment among Iraqis, and asserted that such influence began quietly in the 1990's as Saddam sought to boost his Islamic credentials after the first Gulf War. Zako, who said his sister-in-law had died in a Baghdad church bombing last August, described imams in Mosul as preaching anti-Christian incitement; one such imam, he claimed, delivered a sermon advising Muslims not to buy property from Christians emigrating from Iraq, because "they soon would be able to take it for free."

4. (C) Both Garmou and Zako expressed concern over the prospect of a Shi'ite theocracy taking hold after January 30 elections, with Garmou commenting that the U.S had seen how badly Christians fared under the Iranian theocratic regime. Despite general pessimism on the situation of Christians in Iraq, they reaffirmed their view that Iraqi Christians would participate in high numbers in January 30 elections. Garmou noted that his brother was competing on PM Allawi's electoral list, and described Allawi as one of the few national politicians whom Christians could trust. Zako dismissed Shi'a leaders, including Abdul Aziz al-Hakim of SCIRI and Ayatollah Sistani, as masking disdain for Christians under the Shi'a practice of "takiya," or dissimulating one's true views. Reminded by poloff that registration for Out-of-Country voting for Iraqis residents in France was underway, Garmou said he would remind attendees at mass services in France of the need to participate in elections in large numbers. He added that while the ideal would be for Iraqis to vote for candidates regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, in the current unstable environment it was important for Iraqi Christians to support Christian candidates, to maintain a say in the political process. Chaldean church leaders in Iraq had already called on Iraqi Christians to vote on religious lines, for this very reason.

5. (U) Minimize considered.

Leach